

A Matter of First Importance

Five Tips on How to Keep the Gospel Central in Your Lessons

: BY JOSHUA COOLEY :

“OK, kids, please take a seat, open your Bibles and let’s get ready to watch a short movie clip on disembowelment.”

Have you ever started a kid’s ministry lesson like that?

Probably not. Technically, I haven’t either. Well, I never actually said those words. But I did show the movie clip.

Oh boy ... I’d better explain.

It was the late-1990s, and I was fresh out of college, volunteering with the 5th and 6th grade boys Sunday school class at my childhood church in Maryland. The class teacher, a wily gentleman in his 60s and a longtime family friend, had recruited me to be his assistant. Little did I know then that he was positioning me to take over the class. Sly old fox!

Anyway, I was a greenhorn in every sense. But I loved getting the chance to proclaim the gospel to the boys each Sunday. One week, the lesson was on “devotion to Christ.” As I read the curriculum and considered how to illustrate the topic, somehow my mind turned to “Braveheart,” the 1995 Hollywood epic starring Mel Gibson as William Wallace, the famous 13th century Scottish warrior who led a remarkable rebellion against England’s tyrannical King Edward I before suffering martyrdom.

The movie had recently been released on, ahem, VHS tape, and Gibson’s portrayal of Wallace was a powerful example of

devotion to a cause. Perfect, I thought.

After all, who can forget the movie’s climactic scene, when Wallace refuses to swear allegiance to King Edward before being, well, relieved of his innards on the executioner’s crucible? Instead, he musters all his energy and howls, “FREEDOM!”, leaving the crowd speechless before the executioner’s axe falls.

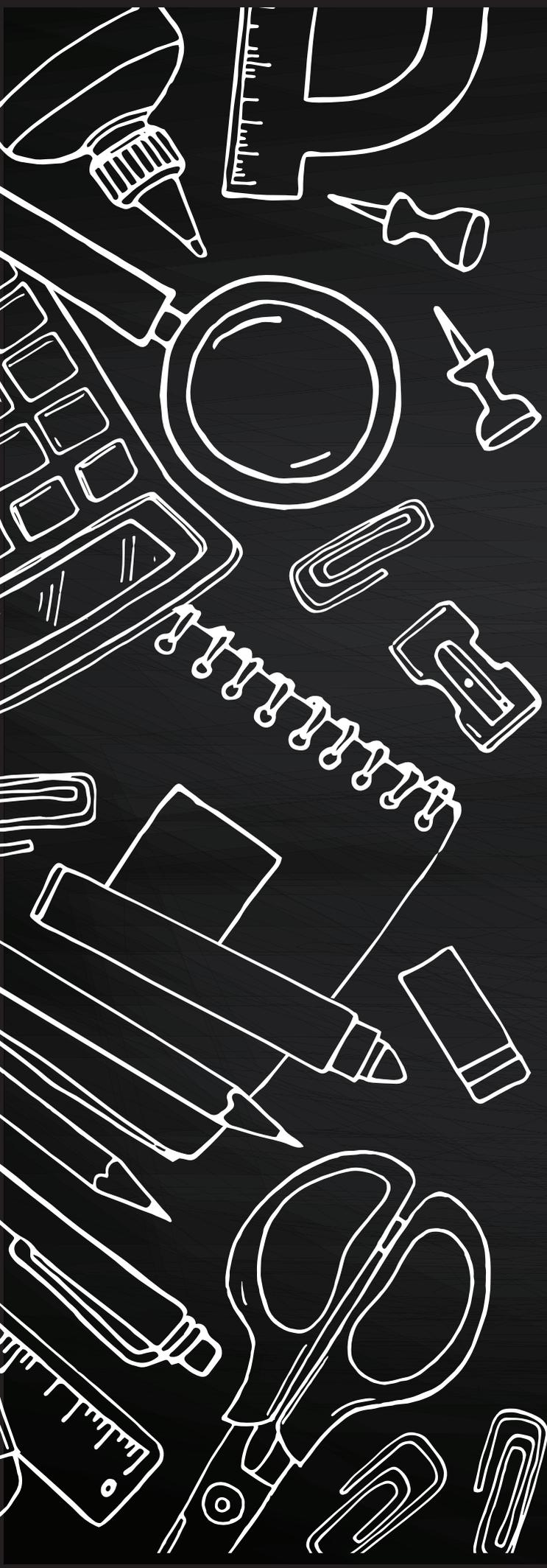
You probably know where this is going ... and yes, I’m cringing, too, even as I reminisce. In my zeal to illustrate unwavering devotion to Christ to my Sunday school boys, I showed them the “Braveheart” death scene. I don’t know if they were amazed or terrified, but like the crowd in the movie, they watched speechlessly.

I was so pleased! Having implanted this vivid anecdote in their minds, I turned off the TV and exhorted my rapt audience to give their full devotion to the Lord, no matter what the cost. I felt good as I left church that day. A little “Braveheart,” a little gospel — boom! Mission accomplished.

That afternoon, the church youth minister called me. His son had attended my class. I thought to myself, Wow, this is great! He’s calling to thank me for speaking God’s Word in powerful, memorable ways to the next generation.

Not exactly.





With grace, he explained how showing the gruesome “Braveheart” death scene to 10- and 11-year-old boys at church was a bad idea. As in foolish. Dumb. Don’t ever do that again.

Point well taken.

Looking back on my rookie (albeit R-rated!) error in judgment, I had made another critical mistake: In my effort to connect with the boys, I had sacrificed too much biblical truth on the altar of cultural relevancy. As ministers of the gospel, we must never strap God’s Word in the back seat and let the latest trends or flashy bells and whistles take the wheel when we teach. Getting this right is mission-critical.

With that in mind, here are five reminders to help you keep the gospel center stage whenever you proclaim God’s Word to kids.

A message of ‘first importance’

Have you ever been at a job or worked on a project where you’ve felt some confusion about your mission? Christians should never experience this!

In 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, the apostle Paul clearly lays out every believer’s mission statement: “For I handed down to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (emphasis added).

As kid’s ministry teachers, we once received the gospel message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, which forever changed our lives. Now, we are privileged to proclaim that good news to others. That’s our mission of “first importance.” When our lesson prep flows from a heart of “show them Jesus” instead of “how can I keep their attention?”, we’ll be on a good path to accomplishing our mission.

Fun-with a purpose

Don’t get me wrong: Bring on the videos, illustrations, skits and object lessons when you teach! Things like this are an important part of Kids Ministry. (Although I’d recommend avoiding R-rated movies!) Children aren’t geared for 40-minute sermons. They are visual, audible and tactile. They learn best from fun lessons that engage multiple senses.

But the attention-grabbers we use are a means to an end, not an end in and of themselves. Our stage lights, props and costumes should point kids to eternal truth. We don’t want to wow children merely with special effects. We want to wow them with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Remind yourself of the gospel

This might sound corny or cliché. But it’s not. You can’t effectively teach kids the glorious message of salvation through Christ if you are not continually amazed by it yourself! Whether you’re in your first year of NextGen work or your 20th, keep falling in love with the gospel.

As you continue to marvel at how God has redeemed you— someone who was once “dead in your offenses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1)—you’ll continue to grow in his knowledge and grace. As you do, the gospel that you are so grateful for personally will naturally begin to take priority in your lesson prep.

All Scripture ultimately points to Christ

Have you ever seen Kids Ministry curricula that looks something like this?

- Bible story: The sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22); key takeaway: When faced with hard decisions, be like Abraham and trust in God!
- Bible story: David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17); key takeaway: When facing giants in life, be like David and trust in God!
- Bible story: Daniel and the Lion's Den (Daniel 6); key takeaway: When wrongly attacked, be like Daniel and trust in God!

Unfortunately, the curriculum landscape is littered with these kind of moralistic, human-centered messages that too often don't point children to the true purpose of a particular text. Perhaps we've even fallen prey to teaching like this ourselves!

As gospel ministers, we must remember this: The Bible is not primarily a collection of stories about mighty men and women whose faith we should emulate. The Bible is chiefly God's revelation of his eternal plan of redemption to save lost sinner through Christ. Our lessons should consistently point kids to this.

In Old Testament lessons, sometimes the gospel connection is obvious (e.g. God's provision of the ram in Genesis 22). Other times, you might have to work a little harder to connect the dots, perhaps with the help of a Bible commentary. But it's worth the effort.

As Jesus said in Matthew 5:17, "Do not presume that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill" (cf. Luke 24:27, 2 Corinthians 1:20).

The enduring Word

We Kids Ministry teachers love our visuals, gadgets, gizmos and thingamabobs. They certainly have their place to grab attention and point to truth. Yet we must acknowledge this: Fads, by definition, will come and go. Methodology will change. (Remember flannelgraph?!) But when we place the gospel centerstage in our teaching, we offer children the saving words of eternal life. As Isaiah 40:8 says, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever."

As his "Braveheart" anecdote indicates, Joshua Cooley has been doing Kids Ministry a long time, both as a volunteer and vocationally. He is also a New York Times bestselling author, and his many books include kids and youth devotionals (<http://joshuacooleyauthor.com>).

